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ABSTRACT

Family care of elderly parents is increasing. The typical caregiver is a married middle-aged daughter who often has additional employment and family responsibilities. Not surprisingly, female caregivers of the elderly report more stress than male caregivers. This study examined perceptions of the nurturance, professional competence and stresses of women and men described as providing either 1-2 or 5-6 daily caregiving hours to elderly parents, and as either reducing their employment hours to provide such care or working full-time. College student raters (N=160), aged 18-24 years, evaluated one of eight employed married adults described as either female or male, as providing 1-2 or 5-6 caregiving hours daily to elderly parents, and as either reducing employment hours to provide such care or working full-time. Caregivers employed full-time were seen as more professionally competent but more stressed than those working reduced hours. Full-time employment diminished perceptions of women's nurturance; reduced employment hours lowered evaluations of men's professional competence. Men who reduced employment hours and provided more care were viewed more positively than comparable women. This finding may exemplify the tendency to magnify the performance of an unanticipated behavior. (ABL)

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Perceiving Elder Caregivers: Effects of Gender, Employment and Caregiving Hours

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Abstract

Raters evaluated one of eight employed married adults described as either female or male, as providing 1-2 or 5-6 caregiving hours daily to elderly parents, and as either reducing employment hours to provide such care or working full time. Caregivers employed full time were seen as more professionally competent but more stressed than those working reduced hours. Increased caregiving hours enhanced perceptions of both nurturance and stress. Full-time employment diminished perceptions of women's nurturance; reduced employment hours lowered evaluations of men's professional competence. Men who reduced employment hours and provided more care were viewed more positively than comparable women.

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE MEETING OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, AUGUST 1992, WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Perceiving Elder Caregivers: Effects of Gender, Employment and Caregiving Hours

Family care of elderly parents is increasing. The typical caregiver is a married middle-aged daughter who often has additional employment and family responsibilities (Horowitz, 1985; Stone, Cafferata, & Stangl, 1987). Middle-aged daughters, even when employed, spend more hours than sons caring for elderly parents, children and households (Douthitt 1989; Horowitz, 1985). Not surprisingly, female caregivers of the elderly report more stress than male caregivers (Horowitz, 1985). Research on the psychological, familial and employment consequences of elder caregiving has focused almost exclusively on caregivers' self-perceptions. Little is known, however, about how employed middle-aged caregivers of the elderly are perceived by others. This study examined young adults' perceptions of such caregivers. Young adults' perceptions are relevant and important because many of them have parents who are themselves caregivers of elderly relatives (study in progress).

The present study examined perceptions of the nurturance, professional competence and stresses of women and men described as providing either 1-2 or 5-6 daily caregiving hours to elderly parents, and as either reducing their employment hours to provide such care or working full time.

Previous research has found that deviations from sex-role expectancies regarding child caregiving are viewed negatively. Full-time employed mothers of infants are seen as less nurturant than mothers of infants who reduce their employment hours. Fathers who reduce employment hours to care for infants are seen as less

professionally competent than those who do not (Etaugh & Folger, 1990). Do similar perceptions exist for caregivers of elderly parents?

Method

Participants

Participants were 112 female and 48 male students (18-24 years old) attending a midwestern university.

Procedure

Participants were told that the study concerned the accuracy of first impressions based on a brief description of a person. Each participant received one of eight booklets in which the stimulus person's description varied with respect to gender, employment status, and number of hours of care provided daily. The description read:

Ann (Alan) Davis is 46 years old and married. Her (his) elderly parents, who are in poor health, live nearby. Ann (Alan) spends 1-2 (5-6) hours every day taking care of her (his) parents. Ann (Alan) also is employed full time as a real estate agent (was employed full time as a real estate agent. However, since taking care of her [his] parents, she [he] has cut back on the number of hours she [he] spends at work.)

The occupation of real estate agent was chosen because it is perceived as gender-neutral and average in occupational prestige (Etaugh & Study, 1989).

Participants rated the stimulus person on 31 7-point bipolar

scales describing personality, job performance, and stress-related variables. The favorable pole of the scale appeared on the left for half the items.

Results

The unfavorable pole was given a score of 1 and the favorable pole a score of 7. Ratings for each scale were analyzed using a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 ANOVA (Caregiver Gender X Caregiving Hours X Employment Status X Participant Gender). Table 1 presents F values and mean ratings for significant main effects. Significant interactions were further analyzed by Tukey's HSD test.

The main effect of caregiver's gender was significant on two scales. Female caregivers were seen as more competitive but more dependent than male caregivers.

Caregiving hours was a significant main effect on two items. Those providing 5-6 hours were perceived as more overworked and physically fatigued than those providing 1-2 hours.

The main effect of employment status was significant on six scales. Caregivers employed full-time were rated as more tense and overworked but more successful in their job, dedicated to career, professionally competent and competitive than those with reduced hours.

Participant's gender was a significant main effect on five items. Females responded more positively than males on three items.

Significant Caregiver Gender X Employment Status interactions were obtained for two items: personally satisfied (F=5.95, p<.02)

and attractive (F=3.98, p<.05). Among caregivers with reduced work hours, males were seen as more satisfied (M=4.03) and attractive (M=4.55) than females (Ms=3.18 , and 4.07 respectively).

Significant Caregiver Gender X Caregiving Hours interactions were found for the likable (F=4.44, p<.04) and dedicated to family (F=7.96, p<.005) scales. For those providing 5-6 caregiving hours, males were perceived as more likable (M=4.55) and dedicated to family (M=5.65) than females (Ms=3.68 and 4.95, respectively).

Significant Caregiver Gender X Employment Status X Caregiving Hours interactions were obtained for two scales: successful in job (F=10.03, p<.002) and competitive (F=6.07, p<p<.02). Male caregivers with reduced work hours and providing 5-6 caregiving hours were seen as the least successful (M=3.00) and least competitive (M=1.95) of all groups.

A significant Caregiver Gender X Employment Status X Participant Gender interaction was found for the affectionate scale (F=5.41, p<.03). Males perceived female caregivers employed full-time as less affectionate (M=4.00) than those with reduced work hours (M=5.00).

Caregiving Hours X Participant Gender interactions were significant for two scales: comfortable with others (F=5.53, p<.02) and affectionate (F=7.90, p<.006). Those providing 5-6 hours were perceived by females as more comfortable with others (M=3.27), and were seen by males as more affectionate (M=4.96) than those providing 1-2 caregiving hours (Ms=2.54 for "comfortable" and 4.37 for "affectionate").

Discussion

Caregivers of elderly parents who were employed full-time or who provided many hours of care were perceived as more stressed than caregivers who reduced employment hours or provided fewer caregiving hours. These perceptions are consistent with self-reports obtained from caregivers in previous research. Caregivers who provided many caregiving hours also were viewed as more nurturant (i.e. more affectionate and comfortable with others).

Consistent with research on perceptions of infant caregivers (Etaugh & Folger, 1990), deviations from sex-role expectancies led to negative evaluations of traditional role behavior. Female caregivers who "deviated" by working full time were seen by males as less nurturant (i.e. less affectionate) than male caregivers who worked full-time. Similarly, male caregivers who reduced employment hours and provided extensive care were seen as less professionally competent (i.e. less successful, less competitive) than their female counterparts. But deviating from sex-role expectancies also led to positive evaluations of men's nontraditional role behavior. Thus, men who reduced work hours and provided extensive elder care were viewed more favorably (i.e. more dedicated to family, likable, attractive, satisfied) than women who engaged in identical behaviors. This finding may exemplify the "talking platypus" phenomenon; i.e., the tendency to magnify the performance of an unanticipated behavior (Abramson, Goldberg, Greenberg & Abramson, 1977). Implications of these findings for female and male caregivers of the elderly are discussed.

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Table 1. F Values and Mean Ratings for Items with Significant Main Effects for Caregiver Gender, Caregiving Hours, Employment Status and Participant Gender.

Item (Left Pole)	Caregiver Gender			Caregiving Hours			Employment Status			Participant Gender	
	F	Female	Male	F	1-2	5-6	F	Full	Reduced	F	Female	Male
Overworked	.08	2.94	2.88	6.94[b]	3.20	2.61	5.01[a]	2.64	3.17	.30	2.87	3.00
Selfish	3.01	6.09	6.41	.07	6.27	6.22	0.0	6.25	6.25	6.13[a]	6.40	5.90
Competitive	4.79[c]	2.99	2.59	.92	2.70	2.87	13.65[c]	3.12	2.45	.39	2.75	2.87
Dedic. to career	1.62	3.49	3.23	1.62	3.49	3.23	41.94[c]	4.03	2.69	2.15	3.46	3.12
Tense	.01	3.06	3.09	.13	3.04	3.11	4.56[a]	2.85	3.30	3.01	2.96	3.35
Dependent	4.27[a]	4.46	5.05	.10	4.80	4.71	.02	4.74	4.77	.41	4.70	4.90
Unintelligent	.11	5.59	5.64	1.78	5.71	5.51	.45	5.66	5.56	5.10[a]	5.72	5.35
Profess. comp.	.31	4.18	4.29	.10	4.26	4.20	5.78[a]	4.75	3.99	.08	4.25	4.19
Rarely overwhelmed	.16	1.84	1.93	.54	1.96	1.80	.26	1.83	1.94	4.77[a]	1.72	2.25
Pers. adj. probs.	2.32	4.51	4.84	1.11	4.79	4.56	.34	4.61	4.74	7.48[b]	4.87	4.23
Successful in job	.67	3.51	3.69	3.10	3.79	3.41	8.60[b]	3.91	3.29	1.00	3.67	3.44
Rarely frustrated	2.68	1.80	1.50	.30	1.70	1.60	.17	1.61	1.69	13.60[c]	1.43	2.17
Physically fatig.	.04	2.70	2.66	5.33[a]	2.90	2.46	.74	2.60	2.76	1.43	2.61	2.85

Note. The range is 1-7, with a midpoint of 4. The higher the score, the more favorable the rating.

All df = 1,224. a $p<.05$; b $p<.01$; c $p<.001$.